THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE, OTHER VERSES AND A PLAY IN VERSE, BY W. B. YEATS.

The Bancroft Library

University of California • Berkeley

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/wildswansatcoole00yeatrich

THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE,
OTHER VERSES AND A PLAY
IN VERSE, BY W. B. YEATS.

THE CUALA PRESS
CHURCHTOWN
DUNDRUM
MCMXVII

CONTENTS

The Wild Swans at Coole 1
Men Improve with the Years 2
The Collar-Bone of a Hare 3
Lines Written in Dejection 3
The Dawn 4
On Woman 4
The Fisherman 6
The Hawk 8
Memory 9
Her Praise 9
The People 10
His Phoenix 11
A Thought from Propertius 13
Broken Dreams 13
A Deep-sworn Vow 15
Presences 15
The Balloon of the Mind 16
To a Squirrel at Kyle-na-gno 16
On being asked for a War Poem 16
In Memory 16

UPON A DYING LADY

Her Courtesy 18
Certain Artists bring her Dolls and Drawings 19
She Turns the Dolls' Faces to the Wall 19

The End of Day 20
Her Race 20
Her Courage 21
Her Friends Bring Her a Christmas Tree 21
Ego Dominus Tuus 22
The Scholars 26

AT THE HAWK'S WELL: A PLAY 27

A Note on 'At The Hawk's Well' 42

THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine and fifty swans.

The nineteenth Autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count.
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold,
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

MEN IMPROVE WITH THE YEARS

I am worn out with dreams;
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams;
And all day long I look
Upon this lady's beauty
As though I had found in book
A pictured beauty,
Pleased to have filled the eyes
Or the discerning ears,
Delighted to be but wise,
For men improve with the years
And yet and yet
Is this my dream, or the truth?
O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth;
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams.

THE COLLAR-BONE OF A HARE

Would I could cast a sail on the water
Where many a king has gone
And many a king's daughter,
And alight at the comely trees and the lawn,
The playing upon pipes and the dancing,
And learn that the best thing is
To change my loves while dancing
And pay but a kiss for a kiss.

I would find by the edge of that water
The collar-bone of a hare
Worn thin by the lapping of water,
And pierce it through with a gimlet and stare
At the old bitter world where they marry in churches,
And laugh over the untroubled water
At all who marry in churches,
Through the white thin bone of a hare.

LINES WRITTEN IN DEJECTION

When have I last looked on
The round green eyes and the long wavering bodies
Of the dark leopards of the moon?
All the wild witches those most noble ladies,
For all their broom-sticks and their tears,
Their angry tears, are gone.

The holy centaurs of the hills are banished;
And I have nothing but harsh sun;
Heroic mother moon has vanished,
And now that I have come to fifty years
I must endure the timid sun.

THE DAWN

I would be as ignorant as the dawn
That has looked down
On that old queen measuring a town
With the pin of a brooch,
Or on the withered men that saw
From their pedantic Babylon
The careless planets in their courses,
The stars fade out where the moon comes,
And took their tablets and did sums;
I would be as ignorant as the dawn
That merely stood, rocking the glittering coach
Above the cloudy shoulders of the horses;
I would be— for no knowledge is worth a straw—
Ignorant and wanton as the dawn.

ON WOMAN

May God be praised for woman
That gives up all her mind,
A man may find in no man
A friendship of her kind

That covers all he has brought
As with her flesh and bone
Nor quarrels with a thought
Because it is not her own.

Though pedantry denies
It's plain The Bible means
That Solomon grew wise
While talking with his queens
Yet never could, although
They say he counted grass,
Count all the praises due
When Sheba was his lass,
When she the iron wrought, or
When from the smithy fire
It shuddered in the water:
Harshness of their desire
That made them stretch and yawn,
Pleasure that comes with sleep,
Shudder that made them one.
What else he give or keep
God grant me— no not here,
For I am not so bold
To hope a thing so dear
Now I am growing old.
But when if the tale's true
The Pestle of the moon

That pounds up all anew
Brings me to birth again—
To find what once I had
And know what once I have known,
Until I am driven mad,
Sleep driven from my bed,
By tenderness and care,
Pity, an aching head,
Gnashing of teeth, despair;
And all because of some one
Perverse creature of chance,
And live like Solomon
That Sheba led a dance.

THE FISHERMAN

Although I can see him still
The freckled man who goes
To a gray place on a hill
In gray Connemara clothes
At dawn to cast his flies;
It's long since I began
To call up to the eyes
This wise and simple man.
All day I'd looked in the face
What I had hoped 'twould be
To write for my own race

And the reality;
The living men that I hate
The dead man that I loved,
The craven man in his seat,
The insolent unreproved
And no knave brought to book
Who has won a drunken cheer,
The witty man and his joke
Aimed at the commonest ear,
The clever man who cries
The catch-cries of the clown,
The beating down of the wise
And great Art beaten down.

May be a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
In scorn of this audience
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And gray Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark with froth,
And the down turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist
A man who is but a dream;
And cried 'before I am old

I shall have written him one
Poem may be as cold
And passionate as the dawn.'

THE HAWK

Call down the hawk from the air;
Let him be hooded or caged
Till the yellow eye has grown mild,
For larder and spit are bare,
The old cook enraged,
The scullion gone wild.

'I will not be clapped in a hood,
Nor a cage, nor alight upon wrist,
Now I have learnt to be proud
Hovering over the wood
In the broken mist
Or tumbling cloud.'

What tumbling cloud did you cleave,
Yellow-eyed hawk of the mind,
Last evening? that I, who had sat
Dumbfounded before a knave,
Should give to my friend
A pretence of wit.

MEMORY

One had a lovely face,
And two or three had charm,
But charm and face were in vain
Because the mountain grass
Cannot but keep the form
Where the mountain hare has lain.

HER PRAISE

She is foremost of those that I would hear praised.
I have gone about the house, gone up and down
As a man does who has published a new book
Or a young girl dressed out in her new gown,
And though I have turned the talk by hook or crook
Until her praise should be the uppermost theme,
A woman spoke of some new tale she had read;
A man so vaguely that he seemed to dream
Of some strange woman's name that ran in his head.

She is foremost of those that I would hear praised.
I will talk no more of books or the long war
But walk by the dry thorn until I have found
Some beggar sheltering from the wind, and there
Manage the talk until her name come round.
If there be rags enough he will know her name
And be well pleased remembering it, for in the old days,
Though she had young men's praise and old men's blame,
Among the poor both old and young gave her praise.

THE PEOPLE

'What have I earned for all that work,' I said,
'For all that I have done at my own charge?
The daily spite of this unmannerly town,
Where who has served the most is most defamed,
The reputation of his lifetime lost
Between the night and morning. I might have lived,
And you know well how great the longing has been,
Where every day my footfall should have lit
In the green shadow of Ferrara wall;
Or climbed among the images of the past—
The unperturbed and courtly images—
Evening and morning, the steep street of Urbino
To where the duchess and her people talked
The stately midnight through until they stood
In their great window looking at the dawn;
I might have had no friend that could not mix
Courtesy and passion into one like those
That saw the wicks grow yellow in the dawn;
I might have used the one substantial right
My trade allows: chosen my company,
And chosen what scenery had pleased me best.'

Thereon my phoenix answered in reproof,
'The drunkards, pilferers of public funds,
All the dishonest crowd I had driven away,
When my luck changed and they dared meet my face,
Crawled from obscurity, and set upon me

Those I had served and some that I had fed;
Yet never have I, now nor any time,
Complained of the people.'

All I could reply
Was: 'You, that have not lived in thought but deed,
Can have the purity of a natural force,
But I, whose virtues are the definitions
Of the analytic mind, can neither close
The eye of the mind nor keep my tongue from speech.'

And yet, because my heart leaped at her words,
I was abashed, and now they come to mind
After nine years, I sink my head abashed.

HIS PHOENIX

There is a queen in China, or may be it's in Spain,
And birthdays and holidays such praises can be heard
Of her unblemished lineaments, a whiteness with no stain,
That she might be that sprightly girl who was trodden by a bird;
And there's a score of duchesses, surpassing woman-kind,
Or who have found a painter to make them so for pay
And smooth out stain and blemish with the elegance of his mind:
I knew a phoenix in my youth so let them have their day.

The young men every night applaud their Gaby's laughing eye,
And Ruth St Denis had more charm although she had poor luck,
From nineteen hundred nine or ten, Pavlova's had the cry,
And there's a player in The States who gathers up her cloak
And flings herself out of the room when Juliet would be bride
With all a woman's passion, a child's imperious way,
And there are— but no matter if there are scores beside:
I knew a phoenix in my youth so let them have their day.

There's Margaret and Marjorie and Dorothy and Nan,
A Daphne and a Mary who live in privacy;
One's had her fill of lovers, another's had but one,
Another boasts 'I pick and choose and have but two or three.'
If head and limb have beauty and the instep's high and light
They can spread out what sail they please for all I have to say,
Be but the breakers of men's hearts or engines of delight:
I knew a phoenix in my youth so let them have their day.

There'll be that crowd to make men wild through all the centuries,
And may be there'll be some young belle walk out to make men wild
Who is my beauty's equal, though that my heart denies,
But not the exact likeness, the simplicity of a child,
And that proud look as though she had gazed into the burning sun,
And all the shapely body no tittle gone astray,
I mourn for that most lonely thing; and yet God's will be done,
I knew a phoenix in my youth so let them have their day.

A THOUGHT FROM PROPERTIUS

She might, so noble from head
To great shapely knees
The long flowing line,
Have walked to the altar
Through the holy images
At Pallas Athene's side,
Or been fit spoil for a centaur
Drunk with the un-mixed wine.

BROKEN DREAMS

There is gray in your hair.
Young men no longer suddenly catch their breath
When you are passing;
But maybe some old gaffer mutters a blessing
Because it was your prayer
Recovered him upon the bed of death.
But for your sake—that all heart's ache have known,
And given to others all heart's ache,
From meagre girlhood's putting on
Burdensome beauty—but for your sake
Heaven has put away the stroke of her doom,
So great her portion in that peace you make
By merely walking in a room.

Your beauty can but leave among us
Vague memories, nothing but memories.

A young man when the old men are done talking
Will say to an old man, 'Tell me of that lady
The poet stubborn with his passion sang us
When age might well have chilled his blood.'

Vague memories, nothing but memories,
But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed.
The certainty that I shall see that lady
Leaning or standing or walking
In the first loveliness of womanhood,
And with the fervour of my youthful eyes,
Has set me muttering like a fool.
You are more beautiful than anyone
And yet your body had a flaw:
Your small hands were not beautiful,
And I am afraid that you will run
And paddle to the wrist
In that mysterious, always brimming lake
Where those that have obeyed the holy law
Paddle and are perfect; leave unchanged
The hands that I have kissed
For old sakes' sake.

The last stroke of midnight dies.
All day in the one chair
From dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme I have ranged

In rambling talk with an image of air:
Vague memories, nothing but memories.

A DEEP-SWORN VOW

Others because you did not keep
That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
Yet always when I look death in the face,
When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
Or when I grow excited with wine,
Suddenly I meet your face.

PRESENCES

This night has been so strange that it seemed
As if the hair stood up on my head.
From going-down of the sun I have dreamed
That women laughing, or timid or wild,
In rustle of lace or silken stuff,
Climbed up my creaking stair. They had read
All I had rhymed of that monstrous thing
Returned and yet unrequited love.
They stood in the door and stood between
My great wood lecturn and the fire
Till I could hear their hearts beating:
One is a harlot, and one a child
That never looked upon man with desire,
And one it may be a queen.

THE BALLOON OF THE MIND

Hands do what you're bid;
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.

TO A SQUIRREL AT KYLE-NA-GNO

Come play with me;
Why should you run
Through the shaking tree
As though I'd a gun
To strike you dead,
When all I would do
Is to scratch your head
And let you go.

ON BEING ASKED FOR A WAR POEM

I think it better that in times like these
A poet keep his mouth shut, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

IN MEMORY

Five and twenty years have gone
Since old William Pollexfen

Laid his strong bones down in death
By his wife Elizabeth
In the grey stone tomb he made.
And after twenty years they laid
In that tomb by him and her,
His son George, the astrologer;
And Masons drove from miles away
To scatter the Acacia spray
Upon a melancholy man
Who had ended where his breath began.

Many a son and daughter lies
Far from the customary skies,
The Mall and Eades's grammar school,
In London or in Liverpool;
But where is laid the sailor John?
That so many lands had known:
Quiet lands or unquiet seas
Where the Indians trade or Japanese.
He never found his rest ashore
Moping for one voyage more.
Where have they laid the sailor John?

And yesterday the youngest son,
A humorous, unambitious man,
Was buried near the astrologer;
And are we now in the tenth year?

Since he, who had been contented long,
A nobody in a great throng,
Decided he would journey home,
Now that his fiftieth year had come,
And 'Mr. Alfred' be again
Upon the lips of common men
Who carried in their memory
His childhood and his family.

At all these death-beds women heard
A visionary white sea-bird
Lamenting that a man should die;
And with that cry I have raised my cry.

UPON A DYING LADY

I

HER COURTESY

With the old kindness, the old distinguished grace
She lies, her lovely piteous head amid dull red hair
Propped upon pillows, rouge on the pallor of her face.
She would not have us sad because she is lying there,
And when she meets our gaze her eyes are laughter-lit,
Her speech a wicked tale that we may vie with her
Matching our broken-hearted wit against her wit,
Thinking of saints and of Petronius Arbiter.

II

CERTAIN ARTISTS BRING HER DOLLS AND DRAWINGS

Bring where our Beauty lies
A new modelled doll, or drawing,
With a friend's or an enemy's
Features, or may be showing
Her features when a tress
Of dull red hair was flowing
Over some silken dress
Cut in the Turkish fashion,
Or it maybe like a boy's.
We have given the world our passion
We have naught for death but toys.

III

SHE TURNS THE DOLLS' FACES TO THE WALL

Because to-day is some religious festival
They had a priest say Mass, and even the Japanese,
Heel up and weight on toe, must face the wall
—Pedant in passion, learned in old courtesies,
Vehement and witty she had seemed —; the Venetian lady
Who had seemed to glide to some intrigue in her red shoes,
Her domino, her panniered skirt copied from Longhi;
The meditative critic; all are on their toes
Even our Beauty with her Turkish trousers on.

Because the priest must have like every dog his day
Or keep us all awake with baying at the moon,
We and our dolls being but the world were best away.

IV

THE END OF DAY

She is playing like a child
And penance is the play,
Fantastical and wild
Because the end of day
Shows her that someone soon
Will come from the house, and say—
Though play is but half done—
'Come in and leave the play.'—

V

HER RACE

She has not grown uncivil
As narrow natures would
And called the pleasures evil
Happier days thought good;
She knows herself a woman
No red and white of a face,
Or rank, raised from a common
Unreckonable race;
And how should her heart fail her
Or sickness break her will

With her dead brother's valour
For an example still.

VI

HER COURAGE

When her soul flies to the predestined dancing-place
(I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made
Amid the dreams of youth) let her come face to face,
While wondering still to be a shade, with Grania's shade
All but the perils of the woodland flight forgot
That made her Dermuid dear, and some old cardinal
Pacing with half-closed eyelids in a sunny spot
Who had murmured of Giorgione at his latest breath—
Aye and Achilles, Timor, Babar, Barhaim all
Who have lived in joy and laughed into the face of Death.

VII

HER FRIENDS BRING HER A CHRISTMAS TREE

Pardon great enemy,
Without an angry thought
We've carried in our tree,
And here and there have bought
Till all the boughs are gay,
And she may look from the bed
On pretty things that may
Please a fantastic head.
Give her a little grace

What if a laughing eye
Have looked into your face—
It is about to die.

EGO DOMINUS TUUS

HIC

On the grey sand beside the shallow stream
Under your old wind-beaten tower, where still
A lamp burns on beside the open book
That Michael Robartes left, you walk in the moon
And though you have passed the best of life still trace
Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion
Magical shapes.

ILLE

By the help of an image
I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon.

HIC

And I would find myself and not an image.

ILLE

That is our modern hope and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;

Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush
We are but critics, or but half create
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed
Lacking the countenance of our friends.

HIC

And yet
The chief imagination of Christendom
Dante Alighieri so utterly found himself
That he has made that hollow face of his
More plain to the mind's eye than any face
But that of Christ.

ILLE

And did he find himself
Or was the hunger that had made it hollow
A hunger for the apple on the bough
Most out of reach? and is that spectral image
The man that Lapo and that Guido knew?
I think he fashioned from his opposite
An image that might have been a stony face,
Staring upon a bedouin's horse-hair roof
From doored and windowed cliff, or half upturned
Among the coarse grass and the camel dung.
He set his chisel to the hardest stone.
Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life
Derided and deriding, driven out

To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
The most exalted lady loved by a man.

HIC

Yet surely there are men who have made their art
Out of no tragic war, lovers of life,
Impulsive men that look for happiness
And sing when they have found it.

ILLE

No not sing
For those that love the world serve it in action,
Grow rich, popular and full of influence,
And should they paint or write still it is action:
The struggle of the fly in marmalade.
The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.
What portion in the world can the artist have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair?

HIC

And yet
No one denies to Keats love of the world;
Remember his deliberate happiness.

ILLE

His art is happy but who knows his mind?
I see a school boy when I think of him
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
For certainly he sank into his grave
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,
And made — being poor, ailing and ignorant,
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
The ill-bred son of a livery stable-keeper—
Luxuriant song.

HIC

Why should you leave the lamp
Burning alone beside an open book.
And trace these characters upon the sands;
A style is found by sedentary toil
And by the imitation of great masters.

ILLE

Because I seek an image not a book.
Those men that in their writings are most wise
Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.
I call to the mysterious one who yet
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
And look most like me, being indeed my double,
And prove of all imaginable things
The most unlike, being my anti-self,

And standing by these characters disclose
All that I seek; and whisper it as though
He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud
Their momentary cries before it is dawn,
Would carry it away to blasphemous men.

THE SCHOLARS

Bald heads forgetful of their sins,
Old, learned, respectable bald heads
Edit and annotate the lines
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in love's despair
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.

They'll cough in the ink to the world's end;
Wear out the carpet with their shoes
Earning respect; have no strange friend;
If they have sinned nobody knows.
Lord, what would they say
Should their Catullus walk that way?

AT THE HAWK'S WELL: A PLAY

Scene: The stage is any bare space in a room against a wall. Against the wall are placed before the play begins, a drum, cymbals, and a stringed instrument. The three Musicians enter slowly. One carries a black cloth. He stands in the middle of the space. The others stand one on either side and slowly unfold the cloth till a part of the stage is hidden. As they unfold it they move backward and outward so that the cloth makes an angle, with one Musician at the apex. Hid by the cloth a girl enters and crouches on the ground. The Musicians sing while the cloth is being unfolded.

I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry,
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare.

(They fold up the cloth singing)
I have dreamed of a life soon done,
Will he lose by that or win?
A mother that saw her son
Doubled over a speckled shin,

Cross-grained with ninety years,
Would cry, 'How little worth
Were all my hopes and fears
And the hard pain of his birth!'
(The Musicians sit down near the wall.)

FIRST MUSICIAN (singing) The boughs of the hazel shake;
The sun goes down in the West.

SECOND MUSICIAN (singing) The heart would be always awake;
The heart would turn to its rest.

FIRST MUSICIAN Night falls;
The mountain-side grows dark,
The withered leaves of the hazel
Half choke the dry bed of the well.
The guardian of the well is sitting
Upon the old grey stone at its side,
Worn out from raking its dry bed,
Worn out from gathering up the leaves.
Her heavy eyes
Know nothing, or but look upon stone.
The wind that blows out of the sea
Turns over the heaped-up leaves at her side;
They rustle and diminish.

SECOND MUSICIAN I am afraid of this place

MUSICIANS (singing) 'Why should I sleep?' the heart cries
'For the wind, the salt wind, the sea wind
Is beating a cloud through the skies.
I would wander always like the wind.'

FIRST MUSICIAN (speaking) That old man climbs up hither
Who has been watching by this well
These fifty years.
He is all doubled up with age;
The old thorn-trees are doubled so
Among the rocks where he is climbing.
(An Old Man enters through the audience from the other side. He crouches down a little way from the well, moving his hands as if he were making a fire. He has, however, nothing in his hands. His movements keep time to strokes upon the drum.)
He has made a little heap of leaves;
He lays the dry sticks on the leaves
And, shivering with cold, he has taken up
The fire-stick and socket from its hole.
He whirls it round to get a flame;
And now the dry sticks take the fire,
And now the fire leaps up and shines
Upon the hazels and the empty well.

MUSICIANS (singing) 'O wind, O salt wind, O sea wind,'
Cries the heart, 'it is time to sleep.

Why wander and nothing to find?
Better grow old and sleep.'

OLD MAN (speaking) Why don't you speak to me? why don't you say,
'Are you not weary gathering those sticks?
Are not your fingers cold?' You have not one word,
While yesterday you spoke three times. You said,
'The well is full of hazel-leaves.' You said,
'The wind is from the West.' And after that,
'If there is rain it's likely there'll be mud.'
To-day you are as stupid as a fish;
No, worse, worse, being less lively and as dumb. (he goes nearer)
Your eyes are dazed and heavy. If the Sidhe
Must have a guardian to clean out the well
And drive the cattle off, they might choose somebody
That can be pleasant and companionable
Once in the day. Why do you stare like that?
You had that glassy look about the eyes
Last time it happened. Do you know anything?
It is enough to drive an old man crazy
To look all day upon these broken rocks
And ragged thorns and that one stupid face,
And speak and get no answer.

YOUNG MAN (who has entered through the audience during the last speech.)

Then speak to me,

For youth is not more patient than old age.
And I have trod the rocks for half a day
Nor found what I am looking for.

OLD MAN Who speaks?
Who comes so suddenly into this place
Where nothing thrives? If I may judge by the gold
On head and feet and glittering in your coat,
You are not of those who hate the living world.

YOUNG MAN I am named Cuchulain. I am Sualtam's son.

OLD MAN I have never heard that name.

YOUNG MAN It is not unknown.
I have an ancient house beyond the sea.

OLD MAN What mischief brings you hither? You are like those
Who are crazy for the shedding of man's blood,
And for the love of women.

YOUNG MAN A rumour has led me,
A story told over the wine towards dawn.

I rose from table, found a boat, spread sail,
And with a lucky wind under the sail,

Crossed waves that have seemed charmed.

OLD MAN There is no house
To sack among these hills, champion to conquer
Nor beautiful woman to be carried off.

YOUNG MAN You should be native here, for that rough tongue
Matches the barbarous spot. You can, it may be,
Lead me to what I seek — a well wherein
Three hazels drop their nuts and withered leaves,
And where a solitary girl keeps watch
Among grey boulders. He who drinks, they say,
Of that miraculous water lives for ever.

OLD MAN And are there not before your eyes at the instant
Grey boulders and a solitary girl
And three stripped hazels?

YOUNG MAN But there is no well.

OLD MAN Can you see nothing yonder?

YOUNG MAN I but see
A hollow among stones half-full of leaves.

OLD MAN And do you think so great a gift is found

By no more toil than spreading out a sail,
And climbing a steep hill? Oh, folly of youth,
Why should that hollow place fill up for you?
Are you a better man than I, who have lain in wait
For more than fifty years to find it empty,
Or but to find the stupid wind of the sea
Drive round the perishable leaves?

YOUNG MAN So it seems
There is some moment when the water fills it.

OLD MAN A secret moment that the holy shades
That dance upon the desolate mountain know,
And not a living man, and when it comes
The water has scarce plashed before it is gone.

YOUNG MAN I will stand here and wait. Why should the luck
Of Sualtam's son desert him now? for never
Have I had long to wait for anything.

OLD MAN No! Go from this accursed place: this place
Belongs to me, that girl there and those others,
Deceivers of men.

YOUNG MAN And who are you who rail
Upon those dancers that all others bless?

OLD MAN One whom the dancers cheat. I came, like you,
When young in body and in mind, and blown
By what had seemed to me a lucky sail.
The well was dry; I sat upon its edge.
I waited the miraculous flood; I waited
While the years passed and withered me away.
I have snared the birds for food and eaten grass,
And drunk the rain and neither in dark nor shine
Wandered too far away to have heard the plash,
And yet the dancers have deceived me. Thrice
I have awakened from a sudden sleep
To find the stones were wet.

YOUNG MAN My luck is strong;
It will not leave me waiting, nor will they
That dance among the stones put me asleep.
If I grow drowsy I can pierce my foot.

OLD MAN No, do not pierce it, for the foot is tender,
It feels pain much. But find your sail again
And leave the well to me, for it belongs
To all that's old and withered.

YOUNG MAN No, I stay. (The girl gives the cry of the hawk.)
There is that bird again.

OLD MAN There is no bird.

YOUNG MAN It sounded like the sudden cry of a hawk,
But there's no wing in sight. As I came hither
A great grey hawk swept down out of the sky,
And though I have good hawks,— the best in the world
I had fancied,—I have not seen its like. It flew
As though it would have torn me with its beak
Or blinded smiting me with that great wing.
I had to draw my sword to drive it off,
And after that it flew from rock to rock.
I pelted it with stones a good half-hour,
And just before I had turned the big rock there,
And seen this place, it seemed to vanish away.
Could I but find a means to bring it down
I'd hood it.

OLD MAN The woman of the Sidhe herself,
The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow,
She is always flitting upon the mountain side
To allure or to destroy. When she has shown
Herself to the fierce women of the hills
Under that shape, they offer sacrifice
And arm for battle; and there falls a curse
On all who have looked on that unmoistened eye;
So get you gone while you have that proud step
And confident voice — for there's no man alive
Has so much luck that he can play with it —
Before she has put a lifelong curse upon you.

Those that have long to live should fear her most,
The old are cursed already. That curse may be
Never to win a woman's love and keep it,
Or always to mix hatred in the love;
Or it may be that she will kill your children—
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
Or you will be so maddened that you will kill them
With your own hand.

YOUNG MAN Have you been set down there
To threaten all who come and scare them off?
You seem as dried up as the leaves and sticks,
As though you had no part in life. (Girl gives hawk cry again)
That cry!
There is that cry again. That woman made it,
But why does she cry out as the hawk cries?

OLD MAN It was her mouth, and yet not she, that cried.
It was that shadow cried behind her mouth,
And now I know why she has been so stupid
All the day through and had such heavy eyes.
Look at her shivering now; the terrible life
Is slipping through her veins. She is possessed.
Who knows whom she will murder or deceive
Before she awakes in ignorance of it all
And gathers up the leaves? But they will be wet,
The water will have come and gone again;

That shivering is the sign. Oh, get you gone!
At any moment now I shall hear it bubble.
If you are good you will leave it. I am old,
And if I do not drink it now will never;
I have been watching all my life and maybe
Only a little cupful will bubble up.

YOUNG MAN I'll take it in my hands. We shall both drink,
And even if there are but a few drops
Share them.

OLD MAN But swear that I may drink the first.
The young are greedy, and if you drink the first
You'll drink it all. Why did you look at her?
She has felt your gaze and turned her eyes on us.
I cannot bear her eyes, that are not of the world,
Nor moist nor faltering; they are no girl's eyes.
(He covers his head)

YOUNG MAN Why do you gaze upon me with the eyes of a hawk?
I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch.
(He goes to the place upon the stage the girl has left.)
Do what you will, I shall not leave this place
Till I have grown immortal like yourself.
(He has sat down. The girl has begun to dance, moving like a

hawk. The Old Man sleeps. The dance goes on for some two minutes.)

FIRST MUSICIAN O God protect me
From a horrible deathless body
Sliding through the veins of a sudden.
(The dance goes on for some two minutes. Cuchulain rises slowly.)
The madness has laid hold upon him now,
For he grows pale and staggers to his feet. (The dance goes on.)

YOUNG MAN Run where you will,
Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist;
Some were called queens and yet have been perched there.
(The dance goes on for some two more minutes.)

MUSICIANS I have heard water splash. (The Hawk goes out.)
It comes, it comes,
It glitters among the stones, and he has heard the plash.
Look, he has turned his head! (Cuchulain drops his spear as if in a dream and goes out as if in a dream. The Musicians sing.)
He has lost what may not be found
Till men have heaped his mound
And all the history ends.
He might have lived at his ease,
An old dog's head on his knees,

Among his children and friends. (The Old Man creeps up to where the well is supposed to be.)

OLD MAN The accursed shadows have deluded me;
The stones are dark and yet the well is empty;
The water flowed and emptied while I slept.
You have deluded me my whole life through.
Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life.
That there should be such evil in a shadow.

YOUNG MAN (entering) She has fled from me and hidden in the rocks.

OLD MAN She has but led you from the fountain. Look!
The stones and leaves are dark where it has flowed,
Yet there is not a drop to drink.
(The Musicians cry out, and clash their cymbals.)

YOUNG MAN What are those cries?
What is that sound that runs along the hill?
Who are they that beat a sword upon a shield?

OLD MAN She has roused up the fierce women of the hills,
Aoife, and all her troop, to take your life,
And never till you are lying in the earth
Can you know rest.

YOUNG MAN The clash of arms again!

OLD MAN Oh, do not go. The mountain is accursed,
Stay with me. I have nothing more to lose.
I do not now deceive you.

YOUNG MAN I will face them.
(Goes out not in a dream, but shouldering his spear and calling.)
He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtam, comes!
(The Chorus stands up. One goes to centre with folded cloth; the others unfold it singing. During the singing the Old Man goes out.)

Come to me, human faces,
Familiar memories;
I have found hateful eyes
Among the desolate places,
Unfaltering, unmoistened eyes.

Folly alone I cherish,
I choose it for my share.
Being but a mouthful of air,
I am content to perish;
I am but a mouthful of sweet air.

O lamentable shadows,
Obscurity of strife,
I choose a pleasant life
Among indolent meadows;
Wisdom must live a bitter life.

(The Musicians fold up the cloth again singing.)
'The Man that I praise,'
Cries out the empty well,
'Lives all his days
Where a hand on the bell
Can call the milch-cows
To the comfortable door of his house.
Who but an idiot would praise
Dry stones in a well?'

'The Man that I praise,'
Cries out the leafless tree,
'Has married and stays
By an old hearth, and he
On naught has set store
But children and dogs on the floor.
Who but an idiot would praise
A withered tree?'

A NOTE ON 'AT THE HAWK'S WELL'

A couple of years ago I was sitting in my stall at the Court Theatre in London watching one of my own plays, 'The King's Threshold.' In front of me were three people, seemingly a husband and wife and a woman friend. The husband was bored; he yawned and stretched himself and shifted in his seat and I watched him with distress. I was inclined to be angry, but reminded myself that music, where there are no satisfying audible words, bores me as much, for I have no ear, or only a very primitive one. Presently, when the little princesses came upon the stage in their red clothes, the woman friend, who had seemed also a little bored, said, 'They do things very well,' and became attentive. The distinguished painter who had designed the clothes at any rate was able to interest her. The wife, who had sat motionless from the first, said when the curtain had fallen and the applause — was it politeness or enthusiasm? — had come to an end, 'I would not have missed it for the world.' She was perhaps a reader of my poetry, who had persuaded the others to come, and she had found a pleasure in the combination of words and speech — a pleasure the book did not give her. Yet when I think of my play I do not call her to the mind's eye, or even her friend who found the long red gloves of the little princesses amusing, but always that bored man. And the worst

of it is that I could not pay my players, or the seamstress, or the owner of the building, unless I could draw to my plays those who prefer light amusement, or who have no ear for rhythmical speech, but fortunately they are all very polite. Being sensitive, and not knowing how to escape the chance of sitting behind the wrong people, I have begun to shrink from sending my muses where they are but half-welcome; and even in Dublin, where the pit has a liking for poetry, I have no longer the appetite to carry me through the daily rehearsals. Yet I need a theatre. I believe myself to be a dramatist; I desire to show events and not merely to tell of them; two of my best friends were won for me by my plays; and I seem to myself more alive at the moment when a roomful of people have the one lofty emotion. My blunder has been that I did not discover in my youth that my theatre must be the ancient theatre made by unrolling a carpet, or marking out a place with a stick, or setting a screen against a wall. Certainly those who care for my kind of poetry must be numerous enough, if I can bring them together, to pay half a dozen players who can bring all their properties in a cab and perform in their leisure moments. I have found my first model — and in literature if we would not be parvenus we must have a model — in the 'Noh' stage of aristocratic Japan. I have described in the introduction to Mr. Pound's 'Certain Noble

Plays of Japan' (Cuala Press) what had seemed to me important on that subtle stage. I do not think of my discovery as mere economy. It has been a great gain to get rid of scenery and substitute for a crude landscape painted upon canvas three performers who, sitting against a screen covered with some one unchangeable pattern, or against the wall of a room, describe landscape or event, and accompany movement with drum or cymbal, or deepen the emotion of the words with zither and flute. Painted scenery, after all, is unnecessary to my friends and to myself, for our imagination, kept living by the arts, can imagine a mountain covered with thorn-trees, in a drawing-room without any great trouble, and we have many quarrels with even the best scene-painting. Then, too, the masks forced upon us by the absence of any special lighting and by the nearness of the audience, who surround the players upon three sides, do not seem to us eccentric. We are accustomed to faces of bronze and of marble, and what could be more suitable than that Cuchulain, let us say, a half-supernatural legendary person, should show to us a face not made before the looking-glass by some leading player — there, too, we have many quarrels — but moulded by some distinguished artist? We are a learned people, and we remember how the Roman Theatre, when it became more intellectual, abandoned 'make-up' and used the mask

instead, and that the most famous artists of Japan modelled masks that are still in use after hundreds of years. It would be a stirring adventure for a poet and an artist, working together, to create once more heroic or grotesque types that, keeping always an appropriate distance from life, would seem images of those profound emotions that exist only in solitude and in silence. Nor has any one told me after a performance that they have missed a changing facial expression, for the mask seems to change with the light that falls upon it, and besides, expression in poetical and tragic art, as every producer knows, is mainly in those movements that are of the entire body.

'At the Hawk's Well' was performed for the first times in April 1916 in a friend's drawing-room, and only those who cared for literature were invited. It was played upon the floor, and the players came in by the same door as the audience, and the audience and the players and I myself were pleased. A few days later it was revived in Lady Islington's big drawing-room in Chesterfield Gardens, for the benefit of a war charity* There was a platform jutting out from a wall, and some three hundred fashionable people, including

The cast was as follows: The Young Man, Mr. Henry Ainley; The Old Man, Mr. Allan Wade; The Guardian of the Well, Mr Ito. The Three Musicians were Mr. Dulac, Mrs. Mann, and Mr. Foulds; and the music was by Mrs. Mann and Mr. Foulds.

Queen Alexandra, were round the platform on three sides, and once more my muses were but half-welcome. I remember, however, with a little pleasure, that we found a newspaper photographer planting his camera in a dressing-room and explained to him that as fifty people could pay our expenses we did not invite the Press, and that flash-light photographs were not desirable for their own sake. He was incredulous and persistent, and it was nearly ten minutes before Dulac persuaded him to go away. What a relief, after directing a theatre so many years — for I am one of the two directors of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin— to think no more of pictures, unless Dulac or some other distinguished man has made them, and not at all of those paragraphs which are written by young men, perhaps themselves intelligent, who must applaud the common taste or starve.

Perhaps I shall turn to something else now that our Japanese dancer Ito, whose minute intensity of movement in the dance of the Hawk so well suited our small room and private art, has been hired by a New York theatre, or perhaps I shall find another dancer. I am certain, however, that whether I grow tired or not— and one does grow tired of always quarrying the stone for one's statue — I have found out the only way the subtler forms of literature can find dramatic expression. Shakespeare's art was public; now resounding

and declamatory, now lyrical and subtle, but always public; because poetry was a part of the general life of his people, who had been trained by the church to listen to difficult words, and sang, instead of the songs of the music-halls, many songs that are still beautiful. A man who had sung 'Barbara Allen' in his own house would not, as I have heard the gallery at the Lyceum Theatre, receive the love-speeches of Juliet with an ironical chirruping. We must recognize the change as the painters did when, finding no longer palaces and churches to decorate, they made framed pictures to hang upon a wall.

Whatever we lost in mass and in power we should recover in elegance and in subtlety. Our lyrical and our narrative poetry alike have used their freedom and approached nearer, as Pater said all the arts would if they were able, to 'the condition of music;' and if our modern poetical drama has failed it is mainly because, always dominated by the example of Shakespeare, it would restore an irrevocable past.

December 1916.

Here ends, The Wild Swans at Coole, other verses and a play in verse, by William Butler Yeats. Four hundred copies of this book have been printed and published by Elizabeth Corbet Yeats on paper made in Ireland, at the Cuala Press, Churchtown, Dundrum, in the County of Dublin, Ireland. Finished on the tenth of October in the year nineteen hundred and seventeen.

PR 5904
W5
1917